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WHAT DO WE MEAN BY DEMOCRACY?

RALPH BARTON PERRY

MR. FREDERIC HARRISON opens a recent article¹ with the following paragraph:

"The war of Nations is being entangled with, is merging into, the war of Class: about sovereignty, ranks, upper and lower Orders; but essentially, between those who hold Capital and those who Work with their hands. National wars, as we see, unite men in nations: Class wars suppress the spirit of nationality, for they herald what Socialists promise as the grander form of Patriotism, the brotherhood of labourers. At the opening of the great European War Democracy was appealed to, and nobly it answered the call in the name of the Nation. But now, in this fourth year of war, we see all over Europe how democratic patriotism is expanding into the new Industrial Order which dreamers for two generations have imagined as the Social Revolution."

Whether we applaud or regret the change which Mr. Harrison describes, we cannot well dispute the fact. His account may be exaggerated, but beyond doubt the war, after its initial effect of solidifying nationalities, has come more and more to heighten class consciousness and international fellow-feeling. The immensity of the war lies not only in its area and volume, but in the profoundness and complexity of its issues. It is not a mere struggle for power among rival nations, but a struggle for ascendancy among rival forms of government, economic policies and social philosophies. The outcome is going to determine not merely what nations shall survive, but what institutions

¹ "Obiter Scripta," *Fortnightly Review*, January 1918.
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and ideals shall survive. It is not merely a question of *who* shall prove strongest, but of *what form of life* shall prove strongest. Thus we, the people of the United States, are not fighting merely in order that we may continue to exist; though this is a very genuine and very proper motive. We are also fighting in order that we may exist in a certain specific way; or in order that a certain specific form of life may through us retain a place in the world. We usually call this specific form of life by the name of "democracy." If we are to be taken at our word, then, we not only intend to exist, and to exist with undiminished strength; but we intend also to be democratic, and to be more fully and more consistently democratic than we have as yet grown to be. We have repeatedly professed this creed on many solemn and public occasions. Do we *really mean* it? And if so, *what* do we mean by it?

If the average man were honestly to express his mind on democracy he would say, adapting Audrey's words to Touchstone: "I do not know what democratic is. Is it honest in word and deed? Is it a true thing?" Of course, living in this time and place, he would be prejudiced in its favor. Democracy is a word to conjure with; and its meaning is so dim and so equivocal that almost anybody can conjure with it. Recent events have increased its vogue, but have at the same time led many persons to ask questions about it. Since its credentials are not clear, some sceptically minded persons are inclined to reject it as a superstition; while credulous persons, on the other hand, are inclined to cling to it all the more tenaciously by an act of blind faith. Many reject or accept it on account of what is supposed to be implied by it. Thus in so far as woman suffrage or the initiative and referendum are said to be democratic those who object to these policies are beginning to say that they never really believed in democracy anyway; while others are confirmed in their democracy from hope of the greater political power that is promised in its name. But precisely what *is* implied by democracy, is so doubtful that both the advocates and the opponents of

compulsory military service have made it the fundamental premise of their arguments. In as much as we are at present more than ever disposed to derive our policies from it, democracy should be more than a symbol like the flag or national anthem. It should have so far as possible an articulate meaning, and a meaning widely recognized and consciously adopted by all in whose decision the choice of policy lies.

There are three great ideas associated with the democratic tradition, *Equality*, *Liberty* and *Popular Government*. Of these three ideas the last two, Liberty and Popular Government define what we mean by political democracy. The idea of liberty means that in exercising restraint upon the individual's action the state shall be guided by the principle of guaranteeing to each individual under the law *the largest possible sphere* within which he may act in accord with his own desires and judgment. Popular Government means that the sovereignty of the state shall be distributed among those whose interests are at stake; that the government shall periodically secure the consent of the governed. Political democracy is the union of these two ideas, of *liberality* and *responsibility*. Whether government of this type shall assume the form of a republic or of a constitutional monarchy is another and a less fundamental question. We are fighting in this war not to substitute presidents for kings; but to substitute parliaments and representative leaders for slave-drivers and autocrats. But political democracy lies outside the scope of the present paper. I propose to confine myself to the idea of *Equality*, as defining what we sometimes call "social democracy." And I must still further limit my subject, by omitting the notion of equality as a dignity to which men are born. One may argue for democracy on the ground that men *are* equal, or on the ground that they ought to be equal,—according as one thinks of equality as an innate possession or as a more or less far-off good thing to be attained only by social progress. I shall here conceive equality not as premise, but as an ideal of social reconstruction.

Equality is a potent symbol, an emotional explosive, indispensable to the arsenal of any poet or orator who wishes to inflame an audience. Like every symbol it is somewhere connected with the living interests and sentiments of men. What, then, are the values that equality represents? When men applaud it, what good thing does it signify to them, that it should so warm their hearts? To what motive does it appeal?

1. *Compassion.* Equality is rooted, first, in the motive of compassion. This motive, instinctive and inalienable, but peculiarly cultivated, intensified and extended by Christianity, prompts men to relieve the manifest distress of their fellows. Compassion is felt for individuals; and it is excited by the aspect which life presents at the lower end of the scale of happiness. On the one hand, then, it regards life concretely as an aggregate of suffering, struggling, hoping men and women; with the result that it tends to the comparative neglect of institutions, laws, and general principles. On the other hand, it is essentially remedial, rather than constructive. It applies itself to raising the minimum rather than the maximum. It halts the vanguard of civilization in order that those who are dropping by the way or lagging in the rear may be brought abreast of the marching column. It is less interested in the perfection of the few, who demonstrate the heights to which human nature can attain under the most favorable conditions; it is more interested in providing the unfortunate man with the staple goods of health, food and protection. It is distributive and extensive in its effect, rather than qualitative and intensive. It is, then, clearly an equalizing motive.

It is this motive which is stronger in women than in men; which is just now more alive to the suffering of individual soldiers and civilians than to the larger issues of the war; which dwells upon famine, pestilence, and cruelty, and is liable to ignore questions of political or economic policy. The range and effect of this motive have been enormously extended by the recent increase of intercommunication

between classes, nations, continents and hemispheres. The feeling for all mankind as a vast aggregate of suffering individuals is no longer a vague and pious sentiment, but a powerful spring of action which must be reckoned with as a force in human affairs. It is the link between democracy and humanity.

The motive of compassion does, it is true, tend to the comparative neglect of the broader considerations of policy; and to the comparative neglect of the arts and sciences. In so far as this is the case it is open to criticism, and even defeats itself. Nevertheless it is essentially sound; not to be rejected, but to be supplemented and corrected. The essential truth which it bespeaks, is this: that in the last analysis the units of life are individual, sentient beings. The merit of any social system is to be judged by the happiness which it creates. And a social system may as fairly be judged by the lot of men at the bottom as by the lot of men at the top. It is comparatively easy to devise a system that shall make some men happy, provided the majority may be sacrificed for the purpose. The great task of civilization is to achieve a happiness that may be generally shared, by which the good of one man shall also enhance the good of another. Until this is achieved civilization may fairly be regarded as on trial. So far, then, the idea of equality means this community and mutuality of life, in which all men shall achieve happiness and perfection together, at a pace which requires neither the abandonment nor the exploitation of the unfortunate.

2. *Emulation.* The second motive of equality, is *emulation*. Men desire to overtake or surpass their fellows in the race of life. Every activity of life,—art, science, and public service, as well as money-getting, politics and “society,” matches one man against others, and distributes the competitors who are entered in a scale of comparative failure and success. The motive of emulation prompts a man to exceed the attainment of others, and it also makes him resent another’s victory when it is not earned. Emulation begets the demand for fair-play, or for a “square deal.”

The race must be to the swift, not to those who from the start find themselves already at or near the goal through no efforts of their own, or to those who are assisted from the side-lines. The man who wins despite initial disadvantages, the "self-made man," is doubly honored; but such initial disadvantages are none the less regarded as contrary to the code of sportsmanship. All competitors must be given an even start; or, as we say, opportunity must be equalized. A social hierarchy in which the accident of birth or "connection" rigidly distinguishes the fortunate from the unfortunate, must according to this code, give place to a more flexible system of interchangeable stations, in which success shall be determined by talent and energy.

That this motive has powerfully affected modern social reconstruction, no one can deny. "Every great social and economical change in modern Europe," says Mr. Cliffe Leslie, "has helped to clear the passage through the crowd, and through the world, for the humblest man with any real individuality."² The enormous extension in modern times of the opportunity for eminence is illustrated by the fact that from the arrival of the Saxons in Britain to the accession of Edward III, only seven great names are recorded in English history, Alfred, William the Conqueror, Henry II, Edward I, Anselm, Becket, and Roger Bacon, of whom four were kings and two were priests. The history of Europe was once a record of lost opportunity; it is now a record of rise from obscurity. The extension of facilities for education, the increase of inter-communication, the abolition of special privilege, the wider and more equal distribution of wealth,—these are some of the means by which this change has come about, and is being accelerated. No one, I think, would propose to retard this change. Not only does it enrich the collective life by utilizing talents which would otherwise remain buried under superficial strata of mediocrity; but it is sound in principle, since it

² *Essays in Economic and Moral Philosophy.*

requires that every form of organized restraint shall have a liberal and provident intent.

A friend of mine has recently made a practice of asking the foreign-born Americans of his acquaintance what motive prompted them to come to this country. With very few exceptions they have answered that it was because they could "get on" here; meaning that they not only could make a living, but always enjoyed at least the chance of prosperity and wealth. The fact that extreme revolutionary propaganda has made so little headway in this country, that labor as a class has not usually found it necessary to form a distinct political party, is due to the fact that the working classes do find a genuine opportunity in the existing system. They are as a whole successful and hopeful. They do not feel an irreconcilable bitterness toward the *bourgeoisie* because, as my friend has expressed it, the more energetic and intelligent among them hope some day to belong to the *bourgeoisie* themselves. They hesitate to destroy a station in life which they think they may someday occupy.

But this represents the attitude of skilled, rather than of unskilled labor; and latterly with the larger immigration from southern Europe and the rapid growth of centralized industries, it has become less and less universal. Even if this were not so, we must recognize the fact that those who enjoy a chance of success are going to insist upon increasing that chance. Prosperity does not always beget contentment. It also increases ambition and sense of power. It was once customary to compare the relatively great opportunity afforded by American life with the relatively meagre opportunity afforded by life at home, in "the old country." But it is now customary to demand more, and to judge opportunity by the standard of the more fortunate rather than by the standard of the less fortunate. We may reasonably expect that no man in the long run is going to be satisfied with anything short of the fullest opportunity that appears consistent with maintaining the total productivity and wealth of the country.

There is a significant phrase in the report of a committee recently appointed by the Labor Party to formulate a program of reconstruction after the war. I refer to the phrase "effective personal freedom." This means freedom that can actually be used to advantage. It implies that that opportunity which is wanted must be a positive and liberal opportunity which is not to be obtained by merely letting things alone, but only by contriving a more favorable situation than that in which the working man now finds himself. If you drive a man up a tree and station a bear at the foot of it, it does not gratify him to be told that he is now free to do as he chooses. If you dismiss your son from your door without food, money or education, and tell him that the whole wide world is now open to him, you have not given him "effective personal freedom." Circumstances may compel him to accept your terms, hard and dictatorial though they may be. Freedom in such a sense is a threat and not a promise.

Similarly if you rear a man in a low social station, in the midst of poverty and ignorance, with the necessity of livelihood forced upon him from an early age, and then tell him that he may rise even to be President of the United States, he is to be forgiven if he does not appear enthusiastic and grateful. If you throw a man into stormy waters far from land, and then tell him that there is nothing to prevent his swimming to shore and making a nice dry warm place for himself there, you do not confer a boon on him. For first he has got to keep his head above water. Even if by great and prolonged exertions he can do that, there is little chance of his living to achieve more. The man who demands "effective personal freedom" wants to be put on shore to start with. He understands that there is a tyranny of circumstance more fatal than that of man; that the worst of all tyrannies is the tyranny of existing things, of that established system which has grown out of human action, but for which no human individual now feels responsible. From men and institutions he demands more than passive permission to do what he can for himself. He knows that for

him the chance of success is an off-chance. He demands that men and institutions shall annul the tyranny of circumstance, and reconstruct the existing system so that the richness of his opportunity shall be somewhere nearly commensurate with his capacity and interest. We must not deceive ourselves by giving the name of opportunity to mere neglect. More often than not, equal opportunity has to be created by actively intervening against established injustice. And we must remember that for all alike to have some chance of the highest success, does not at all imply that they have a like chance even of the smallest success. There is all the practical difference in the world between a fair chance and an off-chance.

3. *Self-respect.* A third motive to equality is *self-respect*, or the resentment of arrogance. No high-spirited man can tolerate contempt. In proportion as a man is conscious of his natural powers and is ambitious to excel he must inevitably believe in himself, and retaliate upon those who habitually treat him as an inferior. This is a different thing, as we shall see, from the dislike of superiority. It is dislike of *conscious* superiority, or of the airs of superiority; because, in the first place, these aggravate accidental advantages and ignore merit; because, in the second place, they imply an attitude of disparagement toward oneself, and force one to self-defense.

But “dislike” is too weak a word. Humiliation begets the most implacable hatred. The sting of humiliation was one of the most powerful motives in the French Revolution. Monsters of cruelty, such as Marat and Carrier, were seeking balm for the incurable wounds inflicted upon their self-love when they were despised subordinates in the establishments of great nobles. Even Mme. Roland, as Le Bon says, “was never able to forget that, when she and her mother were invited to the house of a great lady under the *ancien régime*, they had been sent to dine in the servants’ quarters.” The same author points out that it was not those who had the most solid grievances who led the Revolution, but the *bourgeoisie*, who despite their wealth or

professional success, were contemptuously snubbed by the aristocracy. In a measure, then, Napoleon was justified when he said: "Vanity made the Revolution; liberty was only the pretext."

But this explanation ignores the deeper aspect of the motive. Vanity is accidental and temperamental. The main-spring of revolt was not vanity, but the self-confidence and self-respect which must necessarily accompany attainment. A man who succeeds, or even aspires to succeed, must believe in himself. A democracy of opportunity must be at the same time a democracy of personal esteem. In a society which enables the majority of its members to taste success, or to dream of it, the sentiments of pride, honor and dignity will be widely disseminated. They can no longer be regarded as the exclusive prerogatives of a social caste. This fact is as pertinent to-day as ever. If a fashionable class, an employer class, a "respectable" class, a "high-brow" class, a Bostonian clan, or a white race, feel themselves to be superior, that feeling will infallibly be scented, and will arouse a resentful and rebellious spirit among those who have become conscious of their own worth. There is no escape from this dilemma. Either the masses of mankind must be broken in spirit, and convinced by subjection of the utter helplessness of their lot; or, if they are once allowed to travel on the highroad to success, their pride must be respected. A man cannot be given opportunity without the acknowledgment of his dignity.

4. *Fraternity*. A further motive to equality is to be found in the sentiment of *fraternity*. This is a feeling or attitude which naturally develops among men who recognize their common lot. It develops among lost souls who seek a common salvation, among fellow-adventurers who suffer common hardships, among competitors who acknowledge the same standard of success, or among partners who feel their mutual dependence. It is the converse of the motive which we have just considered. Self-respect demands the esteem of others, and resents

disparagement. Fraternity acknowledges the just pride of others, or accords that which self-respect demands. It is the only possible relation between two self-respecting persons. It does not imply intimacy or friendship, for these must depend upon the accidents of propinquity and temperament; but it implies courtesy, fairmindedness, and the admission of one's own limitations. It must underly the closer relations of family, neighborhood, or vocation; but it must be extended to the broader and less personal relations of fellow-citizenship and fellow-humanity. It is the essential spirit of that finer companionship which even kings have coveted; but in a diffused and rarified form it is the atmosphere which is vital to a democratic community.

It is the motive of fraternity which justifies that freedom of manners which we properly associate with a democracy. A fraternal democracy does not fail to acknowledge superiority; indeed democracies are proverbially given to an extravagance of hero-worship. But they do not like to have superiority too conscious of itself. They do not like to have superiority converted into an institution. Hence they attack every form of class-stratification, and are suspicious of titles and decorations. The great man is always on trial, and can never settle comfortably and permanently into the exalted position to which success and popular applause may have raised him. Furthermore his success is never confused with his person, and is not recognized as an essential attribute. As a statesman, or captain of industry, or general or admiral he may have achieved glory and distinction, but as a man he still ranks with his fellows.

When once this fraternal spirit is strong and widely diffused it has effective ways of protecting itself. In a thoroughly democratic community arrogance is not angrily denounced; it is blighted and withered before it has a chance to mature. If any one were to set himself up in this country as a *wirklicher Hofgeheimrat*, as a genuine court privy counsellor, after a fashion popular in Central Europe, he would not be execrated and mobbed. He would get no

notice at all except in the funny columns of the newspapers. And he would soon learn to take the same attitude himself. The fact is it is pretty hard to feel personally superior, if nobody agrees with you; or to look down on people, if you can't get anybody to look up to you. Those who care greatly for the external expression and recognition of superiority do not belong in a democratic society. There is a place where they will feel quite at home. Only those will be happy in a democracy who prefer to be greeted neither by the upward slant of obsequiousness nor by the downward slant of condescension, but by the horizontal glance of fraternal self-respect.

5. *Envy.* Finally, we must recognize the motive of envy. This motive prompts men to dislike, not the consciousness of superiority, but the substance of superiority. It is doubly vicious. In the first place, it is negative and destructive. The motive of emulation prompts men to exert themselves, and to resent only that which prevents their earning their deserts. Envy on the other hand prompts men to retard those who excel them; or to visit upon others those very disabilities which emulation seeks to escape. Envy is malicious. It derives satisfaction from defeat and failure. Whereas emulation seeks equality by clearing the course and speeding up the race; envy seeks equality by slackening the pace and impeding the leaders. A true sportsman does not resent being fairly beaten; and admires those who achieve the success to which he aspires. He devotes himself to a cult of merit, and aims to exalt the record of attainment by removing every artificial hindrance. But the envious man would rather win unfairly in a slow race, than be surpassed by his fellows in a swift.

In the second place, envy gives rise to a cult of vulgarity. In so far as this motive is widespread and powerful, it leads to a pretence of mediocrity for the sake of conciliating opinion. Men cultivate a sham colloquialism of speech, or roughness of manners; they hide their knowledge or their wealth or their power behind an affectation of inferiority. But dissimulation and dishonesty is not the worst of it.

It discourages every sort of eminence, and robs society of the services of the expert and the leader. It confuses and depresses all standards of excellence. And it confirms the inferiority of the inferior, removing the incentive to excel, and teaching him to be proud of that failure which should fill him with discontent and shame.

There is a good deal of this envious democracy abroad in our land to-day. There is a dislike of "experts," a prejudice to which our demagogues so effectually appeal. In education we like to have everything made easy. We don't want to learn; we want to be taught; we don't want to find out, we prefer to be shown. In this, and in other fields of activity, instead of climbing the ladder we sit comfortably at the foot and wait for an elevator. If the higher things don't come easily, and they rarely do, then we belittle them; while for the same reason we over-rate the shallow and common-place attainment on which we can safely count.

Now a democracy of classes and persons is something to aspire to, but a democracy of values is corruption and nonsense. The best things have got to be worked for, and belong only to those who excel. "Rome was not built in a day." Without patience, and slow cumulative effort, the great things are not attainable, nor ever will be. To disparage or despise the best things and the great things, is an offense to mankind. For what is the use of opportunity, if there is nothing worth gaining? It is better to admire even wealth or power than to admire nothing. There is this much of truth even in Nietzsche. In insisting upon the principle of *Rangordnung*, or order of rank, he was in part protesting against the abolition of standards. If we condemn his demand for a gradation of persons and classes, we must echo and reaffirm his demand for a gradation of values. We must believe that nothing is too good for a democracy. Science, philosophy, art, virtue and saintliness, must be as reverently regarded, as earnestly sought and cultivated as formerly. Otherwise the much-prized opportunity which a democracy affords, is an equal opportunity for nothing.

These several motives which underly the love of equality, are the motives which justify or discredit the ideal of social democracy. In so far as social democracy means a compassionate regard for all human beings as having feelings, powers and capacities of the same generic type; in so far as it means the equalizing of opportunity, and a mutual respect, it rests upon sound and incontrovertible ethical grounds. But, on the other hand, in so far as it exalts failure, inverts standards, and acts as a drag upon the forward movement of life, it is reactionary and abhorrent.

This, or something like this, is what we mean by democracy as a social ideal. Now, do we *really mean it?* The fact is that we have long since committed ourselves to it. We have encouraged the poor to aspire to wealth, the ignorant to seek light and the weak to covet power. We have done more than this,—we have shown them the way. For we have compelled every man to secure the rudiments of education and thus to become aware of the world about him. We permit the organization of the democratic propaganda, we supply the motive, and we bring every man within the reach of it. Last and most important of all we have distributed political power equally among men of every station and condition; with the result that the very few who are fortunate may at any time be outvoted by the overwhelming majority of those who are relatively unfortunate. Does any sane man suppose that what has been scattered broadcast can now be withdrawn? Or that those who possess the opportunity and know it, are going to refrain from using it?

But I do not believe that there are many Americans who would withdraw the pledge and profession of democracy if they could. We have not lost conviction. We need only the courage to see it through.

First, our courage will be tried by the internal readjustments which will be necessary, which are already proving necessary, in so far as social democracy goes forward. It would be fatuous to shut our eyes to the fact that social democracy will have to be paid for. Are we prepared to

pay by surrendering personal advantages that we now enjoy? We are all like Artemus Ward ready to sacrifice our wife's relations on the altar of our country. But this sacrifice will touch our affections more nearly. Most of those who read these words would lose materially by a more equal distribution of opportunity, wealth and power. Now if we enjoy more than the average good fortune, are we willing that it should be curtailed until such time as those who enjoy only the minimum shall be abreast of us? Are we willing to give up our own dear and familiar satisfactions? Or are we democratic only in so far as we expect to gain by it? Are we democratic only in a rhetorical and vaguely sentimental sense, as many profess Christianity or mean to be "good"? If so, we are not ready for the future. This is a time to retrench, not merely in the consumption of luxuries, but in the desire for them. The whole of democracy will be less indulgent to us than the half of it we have so far achieved. Without some previous self-discipline we shall many of us greet the dawn with a wry face. But in so far as we have learned to live more austere, and to find our happiness in those things which are not diminished by being widely shared, we may in the time to come, have the heart to be cheerful despite the realization of our ideals.

But, second, our courage will be tried by the exigencies of the present war. To have the courage of our democratic convictions means a willingness to fight a long hard fight, to endure a wearing and galling strain, in order that we and other peoples like us may be permitted to proceed with democracy. If we are democrats, then Germany as at present governed, motivated and inspired is our irreconcilable enemy. To have the courage of our democratic convictions implies that we accept this challenge. We have first to win the privilege of being good democrats. As our brothers in Russia are learning to their cost this privilege is not to be had for the asking. It is idle for peace-loving democracies merely to interchange their sentiments *when they and their sentiments with them are in mortal peril*. You remember the man who assured his

anxious friend that his dog would not bite him. "You know it," said the friend, "and I know it, but does the *dog* know it?"

We have recently been told that it is our duty to support the President's democratic and pacific professions "up to the hilt." I like the metaphor, and I subscribe to this opinion. I should like only to add that the men who are most unqualifiedly supporting the President "up to the hilt," are the men who have their hands *on* the hilt. I count no man a resolute adherent of democracy or of peace, or of any other good thing who will not, if needs be, fight for that good thing, and with the weapons which will most effectually meet the danger that menaces it. For that reason I salute as just now the best democrats among us all those fortunate men who are in France or on their way.

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